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ABSTRACT

A language camp program that began with a small group of 10- to 12-year-olds whose faculty parents wanted them to retain the German learned on sabbaticals abroad has developed into a program of annual week-long day and resident camps for 150 children, aged 9 to 14 years, learning German, French, Spanish, and Norwegian. The camp was originally housed in college classrooms, but now occupies a church and uses college dormitories for resident students. Three levels of each language are offered, and students have been known to begin another foreign language after completing the third level of the original one. The costs are kept as low as possible, with tuition covering instruction, books, materials, and an ethnic luncheon in the cafeteria, as well as teacher salaries, facilities, and advertising. Teachers are recruited from the area, and some have used the experience for reentry into teaching after extended time off. Texts have been developed for each level of each language, and many brief, lively group activities are interspersed with instructional periods. A parent program at the end of the camp is used to demonstrate what has been learned. A week-long teacher workshop has recently been integrated into the camp program. Parent and teacher reception of the program has been very good, and some expansion is planned. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE CAMPS: THIRTEEN YEARS OF MINOR MIRACLES

BY JEAN PETERSON

I didn't know, when it began thirteen years ago in my living room, that it would become such a significant foreign language offering in our area. New parents plan ahead for the Augustana Language Day Camps when their children are still toddlers, and siblings of former campers assume we will be there for them, too, when they "come of age."

Three college faculty families wanted me to help their young children retain the German learned during sabbaticals abroad. I had just retired from teaching in favor of my own preschoolers and eagerly began what would eventually become a veritable laboratory of foreign language methodology.

Classes originally were held in Augustana campus classrooms, but eventually we needed more rooms than were available. The camp is now housed in a huge Lutheran church near the campus in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, but campers stay in the college dormitories. Approximately 150 children, between 9 and 14, have been coming to learn either German, French, Spanish, or Norwegian. Two or three levels are offered in each language. The camp day is 9:00-3:00 daily, with a half day on Saturday.

I am sharing our camp story because I believe it is something any teacher could create in almost any location. And it would enhance the local language program. Energetic, creative teachers revel in the intense, yet flexible, teaching situation and also in being able to deal with the age when language instruction ought to begin. Young children learn quickly, eagerly do the sometimes silly-looking games we utilize, and establish a positive attitude toward language learning. Language learning becomes a desirable thing to be involved in. When they finish 1, 2, or 3 levels in one language, they often begin a second, and they then pursue the same or yet another language in school. Our "graduates," now in college and beyond, glow over their beginnings and tell us how the crazy things we did at camp in teaching them verb forms and plurals and clauses remain vividly with them yet.

I began with 25 personally invited 10-12-year-old German campers and added more teachers each year after that for additional Level I sections and also Levels II and III in German. In our third summer we added Norwegian,

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which was held in conjunction with a local Nordland Fest. After three more years came Spanish, and, four years ago, French, all now taught the same week.

We try to keep a 12:1 average student-teacher ratio. Some upper levels have 5 or 6 students; some first-level classes might have 16. The smaller church rooms are more ideal for our instruction than the college classrooms we first used. Church choir rooms and dining halls are good for group activities such as folk-dancing, films, singing, skits, and programs for parents at week's end.

We now have a teaching staff of 15, with salary ranging from $200-250 for the week's involvement. We pursue teachers who are known locally for their energy and creativity. I am a teacher of methodology at the college and have recruited some of my best students over the years. Some have taught for us for several years. Others have moved away, but these have without exception been grateful for the experience. I consider the camp to be valuable in training and retraining teachers. Some have used the camp to "test the water" before returning to teaching after being home with small children.

We charge $60 tuition, and that covers instruction, books, materials, and an ethnic luncheon, which the college cafeteria prepares once during the week.

Tuition also pays for newspaper ads, a brochure, a mailing to area schools, other materials, and rental of facilities, beside the salaries. The enrollment has been stable enough the past few years that I have been able to include a $2000 salary for myself. Camp preparations begin in early spring--though not full-time, of course--with fairly intense involvement two weeks before camp week and one week after. Tuition might be raised by $10 next summer, which would probably enable the college to realize some profit besides the dormitory and cafeteria income. In recent summers enrollment has seemed to level off at 150, and the director's salary was established only last year for the first time. Prior to that, it was a somewhat arbitrary figure based on income minus expenses.

The $80 room-board-supervision fee for the 40 annual live-in campers goes directly to housing and food services and to those who supervise from

3:30 each day and stay with the children in the dormitory. Afternoon and evening activities are planned for them, including lawn "Olympics," VCR movies, swimming, city tours, and popcorn parties.

We are excited about possibly moving the live-in camp to a church camp in the Black Hills in 1986 on an experimental basis. Classes would continue to be held for approximately 6 hours each day, and the church camp staff would take care of afternoon and evening entertainment and outdoor activities. We anticipate that it will be easier for us to manage with such an arrangement than with dormitory supervision, even though the dorm experience for non-commuters has been a very positive one, according to the enthusiastic response each year.

No matter what directions we move in, we wish to maintain a relatively inexpensive camp program in order to continue to promote the idea that languages are not just for an elite segment of society. No matter what develops in the Black Hills, we will continue the less expensive day camps in Sioux Falls.

What about curriculum?

Surrounded by walls full of our and their own "visuals," our teachers are encouraged to be creative in both content and methodology. However, they structure their teaching around a text which has been developed for each level in all 4 languages--most based on a format which includes, in Level I, a sequence of vocabulary areas, each followed by approximately 20 question-answer dialogue items to be used to build language habits and to establish familiarity with language rhythms. Short, 5-line items for memorization are also included in order to foster fluency, and there are some written exercises in the text.

A multitude of games, songs, and skits are integral to the curriculum in that, after perhaps 15 minutes of instruction, including the oral dialogue repetition, and 10 minutes of writing practice through some simple exercises in the textbooks, these are used to reinforce what has been learned. A fairly sophisticated visual Bingo-type game, "Rhythm" with vocabulary, guessing games, and simple skits based on familiar fairy tales, ads, and cultural situations are some of these reinforcement activities. We encourage a change

of pace at least every 15-20 minutes.

A 45-minute "program" for parents and friends at the close of camp on Saturday forenoon demonstrates various learning activities, including some choice songs and skits. These presentations give us a chance to show what is most important in our camp--effective and energetic language instruction. They also provide incentive for the campers to prepare various items in the language. As with the memorizing, fluency is enhanced by the repetition and practice here. Parents tell us they are astounded at the language progress in just a few days. We ourselves have been amazed for years at how much young children can absorb.

Two years ago we began offering a week-long workshop for foreign language teachers during camp. One forenoon is spent observing camp instruction. Participants hungrily take notes on the "visuals," games, and teaching techniques. A few have returned to their hometowns with concrete ideas for implementing their own adult education or summer children's programs. Most important, however, they have been inspired by the energy and freshness of the young campers and speak of feeling renewed and eager to implement more varied methodology in their regular classes during the year.

Parents are grateful for our camp. Our day-camp program has filled a void in this city of 90,000, where no sustained language instruction is offered until grade nine. We have enjoyed good media coverage, but feel our most valuable public relations tool is the campers themselves, who seem to be pleased and proud of their achievement. They have entered a world which was previously a mystery, and their parents are happy about this unusual and very positive academic experience. Local language teachers later keep us informed about "our kids" and have appreciated the added promotion of languages in the until-just-recently lean years. Our state legislature passed a college-entrance requirementof 2 years of a foreign language as of 1987, and therefore the foreign language situation is significantly altered regarding recruitment. However, as in the past, from 100 to 150 parents each year have decided that early language training is important, and we expect to see gradual growth in enrollemnt in spite of a proliferation of athletic and academic children's camps in our area--many based on our much-tested format.

We're heading into year thirteen. We continue to be amazed at the results of that intense week. We've had twelve years of miracles with some very special minors.